SURVIVAL IN THE FAST LANE

September 3, 1989, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Ezekiel 18:1-9
Luke 12:22-30

"...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on." -Luke 12:22 (RSV)

It's exhilarating to be in the fast lane. There are people to see and places to go. Life in the fast lane is lived fully: each hour of each day is packed with intentional activity: feelings are intense: colors are bright: food is rich: music is loud: there is passion and excitement and laughter: no moment is wasted. Every time I am away for a while I conclude upon returning that there is something about a city that very simply magnifies - multiplies, if you will - the volume of human experience that comes at us every day. City people, I think, love it. We complain about it, of course, but it's a ritualized lament. To complain about how busy one is, how hurried, behind and stretched out is, I think, a kind of urban modern litany. The ritual inquiry about one's well being with which we greet each other - "How are you?" - is almost never answered with a declaration of how one actually is. Rather we respond by describing the pace at which we live. "How are you?" "I'm busy, overloaded, late and tired." It's a way of saying something about our sense of ourselves and the importance of our activity, I suppose. Actually, I suspect we love it. And even if we aren't in the fast lane we love being close to it.

It's exhilarating to be in the fast lane but we are learning that it is also costly. We are suffering an epidemic of stress and stress-related illness: we are learning that burn-out, hypertension, ulcers, heart disease, chemical addiction - in fact a whole catalog of addictive behavior results from too much stress.

Life may be exhilarating in the fast lane but it's also dangerous. Philosopher Will Durant once observed that "no man who is in a hurry is quite civilized." A deliberate pace, measured, balanced, used to be the model. But that was another age - another era. It's different today. Today we'd put it: "No man who is not in a hurry is working hard enough." All of life, urban or rural, is quickening, hurrying, accelerating.

"In 1922 Emily Post advised her readers that the proper mourning period for a mature widow was three years. Fifty years later Amy Vanderbilt urged that the bereaved be about their normal business within a week or so." That's acceleration!

Those vignettes were illustrations in a recent Time Magazine feature article, "How America Has Run Out of Time." [April 24, 1989]

The magazine began with the observation that people who had time to read the article with their feet up, free of interruption, are in the minority. For most Americans "time has become the most precious commodity in the land."

It's not just your imagination. We are living faster. The pace in the fast lane has accelerated. It's a fact that in these past 15 years the average work week has jumped from 41 to 47 hours. For many lawyers, physicians and other professionals, an 80 hour week is not unusual. At the highest levels of big business and industry, there is a new reality which has had enormous impact on all of life. The need to cut costs while increasing efficiency in order to keep up with the demands of heavy debt and very aggressive foreign competition has produced a new kind of hyper-active management style and a new generation of go-go executives who expect employees to be at work early, to stay late, seven days a week. People who can't keep up, or whose personal values and commitments demand balance, will not be around long. It is a fact, says Time that the amount of leisure time enjoyed by the average American has shrunk by 37% in those same 15 years.

And so life in the fast lane is characterized by "gourmet take-out" because even microwave dinners are too much trouble; a new line of Hallmark cards for busy parents to leave behind for their children - "Have a super day at school," says one for leaving with a bowl of cornflakes. "Wish I were there to tuck you in," says another for putting under a child's pillow; and a whole new genre of entreprneurship: "At Your Service" will do anything you do not have time to do: pick up your laundry, shop, return your videos, change light bulbs.

Now the irony is that we thought it was going to come out differently. Twenty years ago we thought technology was going to save us so much time that we would have a major cultural crisis with so much time on our hands. How to deal with all the leisure Americans were going to have in the future was the topic of serious academic inquiry. In 1967 a Senate Hearing on technology and works concluded that by 1985 the average work week would be reduced to 22 hours, we could all retire at 38, and we would be hard pressed to find enough to do.

What in the world happened? Well for one thing, the technology that was supposed to save us time did just that, but did something else as well. It showed us how much more we could accomplish. So now we have car phones to do business and make appointments while stuck in traffic, and lap top computers to work while waiting for airplanes, and answering machines to assure that no message is lost or delayed, and fax machines to fire information across continents instantaneously.

"Technology is increasing the heartbeat" of civilization. Technological advances saved time but accelerated the pace with the ironical result that the very devices we invented to give us more time have driven us to work harder."

The concluding paragraph of the article is a provocative introduction to the New Testament Lesson this morning.

Time said, "No combination of innovations, inventions or timely hints will restore (us) to our imagined bygone tranquility. Only a dramatic change in both attitudes and economics would offer a genuine respite... At some point individuals must find the time to consider the price of their preoccupation and the toll on the spirit enacted by exhaustion. With too little sleep there are too few dreams."

One time Jesus said:

> "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing... Consider the ravens... consider the lilies."

Telling a human being not to be anxious about his or her life is like telling a person with a head cold not to sniffle and sneeze, quips Frederick Buechner. Or like telling an alcoholic not to want a drink. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship said about those words of Jesus, "'Be not anxious for the morrow,' (that) either it is cruel mockery for the poor and wretched, the very people Jesus is talking to who, humanly speaking, really will starve if they do not make provisions today... or it is the unique proclamation of the gospel of the glorious liberty of the children of God." [p. 158]

It is either a word of radical liberation or an altogether silly word. It is either a relevant response to the human dilemma described by Time Magazine, or else it is one more example of religious foolishness.

So let's go in deeper. Is there a connection between the frenzied pace of life in the fast lane and our Lord's deceptively simple admonition? Is there a theological way to understand our own drivenness and therefore a way to save us from it?

"Do not be anxious about your life" said Jesus. He did not say, "Take no thought for your life" as the old translation has it. The Greek really translates into "anxiety" - "worry" really isn't strong enough. What he said was "don't be immobilized by anxiety over the future."

Nineteen centuries later our best thinkers were concluding that something like that is exactly what happened to all of Western Civilization. W. H. Avden wrote a poem, The Age of Anxiety and gave it a name. Historians, psychologists, philosophers agreed that the middle of the twentieth century, with two ghastly world wars already fought, and a prospect of a third looming under the mushroom clouds of the nuclear age, was indeed, a time of new and universal anxiety.

Philosopher and psychologist, Rollo May wrote a standard text book, The Meaning of Anxiety, and proposed that anxiety was the modern form of a medieval plague, "the greatest destroyer of human health and well-being." [p. 37]

Franz Kafka wrote a novel, The Castle, in which the main character spends his entire lifetime trying to get in touch with the authorities in the castle, and fails and the motif is underlying, foreboding anxiety.

So maybe Jesus is on to something more profound than an individual worrying about the next meal.

If you have been reading the reminiscences about the period prior to the Second World War recently you may have noticed that most historians relate the rise of Fascism to a deep-seated anxiety.

Paul Tillich was a refugee from Nazism. Here is how he described the 1930's in Germany:

"First of all a feeling of fear, or more exactly, of indefinite anxiety was prevailing. Not only the economic and political, but also the cultural and religious, security seemed to be lost. There was nothing on which one could build: everything was without foundation. A catastrophic breakdown was expected at every moment. Consequently, a longing for security was growing in everybody. A freedom that leads to fear and anxiety has lost its value; better authority with security than freedom with fear." [The Protestant Era, p. 245]

The theologians of our century have proposed that anxiety, the human propensity to be anxious is very near to the essence of our humanness. We are God's worrying creatures. No one else in creation frets about tomorrow. Consider the birds - indeed. They don't worry about the future. Something like 80% of them die every winter precisely because they don't provide food and shelter for the morrow. Alone in creation we know and are worrying. Not only about what will happen if I get fired, or the plane crashes, or the test comes back positive, or if she doesn't love me, of if I flunk the exam, or if my enterprise fails. Not only are we quite capable of and actually consummately skilled at worrying about all the terrible things that might happen, we alone in creation know about ultimate nothingness, ultimate darkness. Even though we make jokes about it, the philosophers, the truth-tellers, know that awareness of it - dread - is off in a corner of every human soul.

And so we live out of it in a kind respectable but deadly serious search for security and safety. And there are not enough nuclear weapons, or Strategic Defense Initiatives or Stealth Bombers to resolve that one, nor are there enough insurance policies or IRA's or tax-sheltered annuities to deal with it.

My proposal is that there is an insidious and destructive relationship between the frenzied, obsessive pace of life we live, and this old notion of human anxiety. I propose that we live fast and frantically because so long as we are running we know we are alive.

Time Magazine almost became theological in the middle of the essay I have been citing. "Some time in the 80s, "Americans came to worship career status as a measure of individual worth, and many were willing to sacrifice any amount of leisure time to get ahead." The work ethic has gone mad.

"Life is more than that" said Jesus. And you know that he spoke truth. You and I know that life is more than that; that life in the fast lane may be exhilarating, but it can also be very dangerous and lonely and frightening and exhausting and depressing - and if it is a way of assuring our ultimate security it is, finally, hopeless. It is a good word, Jesus. It's good to know what ails us and why we are the way we are, but is there another word here? A saving word? A word that might help us survive?

Some have heard a word that leads to a radical alternative. Some climb back down the career ladder, drop out, step off the track and walk on the sidelines. Some have heard a word of radical trust and simplicity - not all, but some have. St. Francis of Assissi for one. But for every Francis who responds in trust, who sells all and simply and faithfully decides to live today, trusting that God will provide tomorrow, there must be a host of others, planning, working, breaking bread, earning a profit, sewing the clothes - or St. Francis will starve or freeze tomorrow.

Is there, that is to say, a relevant word here for the most of us who are going to learn to stay at it - somewhere near the fast lane?

There is. It comes at the end. It sounds so innocuous at first that we are inclined to miss it. Jesus said, "Do not be anxious about your life." He also said "seek God's Kingdom and these things - all the things you need, truly need, will be yours as well."

Now, God's Kingdom is not a Shangrila, a respite from this world of care. God's Kingdom is where people live in peace; where there is justice for all; where individuals and structures are guided by kindness and compassion. So it's a busy place and seeking it means a lot of work.

It's not simply theological analysis of the human condition and it's not pop psychology or stress management or relaxation technique. It's Gospel. It's saving good news. Care about big matters. Fill your soul with passion for God and God's Kingdom on earth. Worry about big matters and you won't have time to worry about little ones.

The promise of Christianity is that when you give your heart to God's Kingdom - when God's agenda of love and justice and peace and compassion become your agenda - you are going to make a wonderful discovery. You are safe... from everything that can do you ultimate harm. You have what you need to live. And you are free.

But in the meantime we must go on living here, in what Dan Wakefield called "the psychic guerrilla warfare of everyday life." And so we do worry. We work very hard. We do our best, give our all and want simply for our effort to count for something. We are anxious about our lives and part of the reason we come here, I think, is because we can slow down for

an hour or so, and because for this one hour there is the opportunity at least of putting the whole business in some larger perspective.

I was struck by the words of the Psalm we read earlier:

"take me out of the net which is hidden for me."

That's how life feels sometimes - a net - a web of obligations, expectations, goals, objectives, performance reviews and full calendars from which we cannot extricate ourselves.

"Into thy hands I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God."

We bring a net of anxiety with us. But the gracious word of Jesus is that we do not have to live in it. It is Labor Day weekend, the time for many of us when the starting gun is about to go off again. It is a good time to hear Jesus' word of radical liberation.

If you are not St. Francis and do not and cannot plan to sell all and live simply, then at least understand your driveness: take charge: make difficult decisions: live honestly and - above all take a deep breath and be reminded that the God who created you is faithful. You are not alone on the fast track. There is one who stands with you and runs with you and will uphold you. There is one in whose hands you are safe and in whose love you are free.

The invitation of the Gospel is to trust him. He is the one who said:

"Do not be anxious about your life... Instead, seek God's Kingdom and these things will be yours as well."

Amen.